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The Lure of Empire

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Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a Postscript on Abu Ghraib. By BRUCE LINCOLN. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. xvii + 176 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-48196-8 (cloth); ISBN 0-226-48196-4 (cloth) (cloth/hb.), 30 USD.

With the publication of four seminal collections of essays (*Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 1989; *Death, War, and Sacrifice*, 1991; *Authority*, 1994; *Theorizing Myth*, 1999), Bruce Lincoln, a former student of Eliade and (since 1993) professor of the History of Religions at The University of Chicago's Divinity School, has emerged as one of the most distinctive and prominent voices of the study of religion(s) in North America and beyond. Not quite unlike his teacher, in his research Lincoln covers a vast terrain of periods, places, and topics. His essays deal with, among other things, Guatemalan curanderismo, Lakota sun dances, Melanesian funerary rituals, Swazi kingship, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, Marco Polo, professional wrestling, and the theology of George W. Bush, to quote the selection provided on his homepage. In actual fact, his field of inquiry is much larger. Unlike his teacher, however, Lincoln's main focus is on the ideological and political underpinnings and consequences of the rituals and myths he studies. Lincoln's analyses are grounded in a type of analysis that can loosely be called historical-structural and his work is informed by a critical-discursive theory of religion unfolded in the first essay of his collection

Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11 (2003; see *Numen* 54/3, 340–351). Also the present volume, which “explores the contribution of religious discourse, imagination, and desire to emergent imperial ambitions” (xi), is occasioned by the post 9/11 events. Contrary to *Holy Terrors* and most of his previous writings, however, *Religion, Empire, and Torture* focuses on one single extended case study. It therefore more closely resembles a classical form of a monograph rather than a collection of various essays with a leitmotiv.¹

The case study he regards as “extraordinarily revealing” (xii) for the understanding of the ‘logic of empire’ is Achaemenian Persia (mid/late sixth century BCE to 330 BCE), “by far the largest, wealthiest, most powerful empire of the ancient world prior to the emergence of Rome” (xii). Besides Lincoln’s book, the early years of the present millennium have seen a renewed interest in that empire, witness two major exhibitions in England and Germany. Moreover, several prominent Iranian philologists such as Jean Kellens (2002), Éric Pirart (2002), and Prods Oktor Skjærvø (2005) have in recent years pointed to religious motives underlying Achaemenian imperial propaganda. Lincoln now likewise adopts that approach.² His main interest is, as he puts it, “how religion, empire, and torture can be interrelated” (16).

Lincoln makes it clear that he deals with the Achaemenians “as a spectacularly instructive example that lets us consider more general issues, not as an object of inherent fascinations” (16). As his postscript on Abu Ghraib (even featured in the title, perhaps also to increase sales figures) makes clear, Lincoln clearly expects the case-study to throw light on the imbroglio the US currently imposes on Iraq and the rest of the world. But it would be far too easy to dismiss Lincoln’s strategy of using Achaemenian Persia as a straw man to disguise a critical analysis

¹ The book has won the Frank Moore Cross Award for 2007 of the American Schools of Oriental Research.

² Lincoln points to two major influences (both from France): Clarisse Herrenschildt (to whom the book is dedicated), author of several important studies of the Achaemenian inscriptions published in the 1970s, and Marijan Molé who committed suicide when his groundbreaking work (providing an eschatological-ritual rereading of ancient Iranian religious history) was rejected as a doctoral thesis. In a note (on p. 110) Lincoln accuses the Italian scholar Gherardo Gnoli of having published an “aggressive” review of Molé’s work in 1965 (in *RSO*). Having reread that review, I cannot share Lincoln’s judgment, for Gnoli’s review is positive in the extreme!

of the foreign policy of the Bush administration.³ For this would not do justice to the insightful discussion of Achaemenian religious politics that Lincoln unfolds in this small, but dense book, which is, as most of Lincoln's works, brilliantly written and, again like most of Lincoln's writing, packed with figures and tables underpinning his arguments.

The reader will soon find that the chapters consist of a series of rather short sketches, fuller documentation often diverted to the endnotes. The brief sketches are mostly arranged like pieces in a mosaic rather than in a sustained line of argument. Unfortunately, the book does not have a proper conclusion. Nor does it have an index locorum.

Chapter One, entitled "Introduction" (1–16), presents a brief sketch of the Achaemenian Empire (between empire and torture, as it were) addressing the manipulations of dynastic genealogy, the careers and acts of two main monarchs (Cambyses and Darius the Great), some general features of the royal inscriptions as the main primary sources, and some thoughts on different categories of secondary sources. Lincoln finds that the disputed question whether the Achaemenians, or at least some kings, were Zoroastrians "of relatively little interest. Ultimately, I suspect that it is either unresolvable or simply a matter of semantics." (16) (Note that Lincoln elsewhere makes a lot out of issues others might find to be pure matters of semantics. Consider also that later chapters keep on referring to Zoroastrian literature as if they were part of an unbroken religious tradition. It is also noteworthy that Lincoln does not mention other cults that were practiced in Achaemenian times and therefore tends to present a rather homogenous picture of 'religion' in the Achaemenian Empire.) The chapter introduces some key sources and findings that are referred back to in subsequent chapters. In that sense, it serves as a repository of anticipated conclusions.

Chapter Two, entitled "Center and Periphery" (17–32), takes an analysis of the spatial division presented by a rock relief at Bisitun

³) David P. Gushee makes this point in his review in the *JAAR* (76/2 [2008], 489): "this is a book (an extended essay, really) whose text is imperial Persia and subtext is imperial America. The former gets 96 pages, the latter 10. Yet throughout the book, it seems clear that, in the heart of the author, text and subtext are reversed. This is really a book about imperial America, inspired by the revolting images from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq sent around the world in 2004. The author has chosen to illuminate the meaning of Abu Ghraib through a careful study of imperial Persia."

(depicting the victory of Darius over the rebels) as its point of departure. Lincoln loosely relates the pictorial construction of space and spatial hegemony to cosmogonies in two Pahlavi (= Zoroastrian Middle Persian) treatises written down more than 1,500 years later. To my eyes, the Pahlavi texts adduced by Lincoln present at most an analogy, but clearly no homology. Lincoln's structural reading of the relief is brilliant, but his description stating "a radical contrast between God above and an archrepresentative of the Lie below, with the righteous King Darius between them" (17) is also significantly inaccurate, for the main opponent of the King is not "below" (in the sense of being lower than the other humans, including the King), but merely at the lower level of the frame; the Liar is also not directly underneath the winged figure interpreted by Lincoln (and others) as Ahura Mazdā, nor exactly "between" the God and his king, but is situated on the left of the vertical axis, underneath one foot of the King. Lincoln continues his spatial analysis by looking at the central (and by implication primary and dominant) position of Persia and the Persians within the mental geography contained in the list of countries in the royal inscriptions. He then proceeds to highlight the relationship between violence and tribute, "the reciprocal exchange of outbound violence for inbound wealth" (26) as one of "the reciprocal processes that constitute and maintain any imperial system" (25). Lincoln argues that "when those who define themselves as inhabiting the center also construe that site as more noble, more worthy, more moral than the periphery — as was true in Median, Persian, and general Iranian cosmology — they can theorize conquest as a benevolent act that brings benefit to the conquered." (26) That may well be true (if not a truism), but at this point Lincoln fails to provide direct evidence for this claim; the only source is a possible reconstruction of a likely Persian optic underlying an episode recounted by Herodotus (26–29). This is followed by a section in which Lincoln points to different views of the violability of contracts among Greeks and Iranians respectively; the more pragmatic attitude of the Greeks, Lincoln argues, would have made them appear as liars to the Persians, thereby confirming their position on the periphery, "from which perspective the proper response was to conquer and civilize them" (31). Lincoln here tries to reconstruct how the Persians themselves might have perceived the Greeks and their conflict with them. Referring to a quote

from an inscription by Darius to the effect that the goal of war was pushing the enemy far back from Persia [DNa §4] he once again points to the spatial (center-periphery) underpinnings of visions of conflict. Moreover, Lincoln extrapolates from the inscriptions the idea that the adversaries (Scythians and Greeks respectively) first had to be presented as lying (or being susceptible to the Lie) in order to make an invasion appear as legitimate; and he connects that to a Middle Persian text (again written some 1,500 years later) stating that Ohrmazd did not consider a pre-emptive strike but rather had waited for the adversary to attack first [Dd. 36,13]. While Lincoln reads that as articulating “the same idea in theological and cosmological terms” (32) I cannot fail to note the drastic differences between both sources: one legitimising pre-emptive strikes, the other de-legitimising them! The difference is striking if we follow Lincoln’s own lead and compare them to US policies: While the first version corresponds to the US propaganda claiming that Saddam lied about the existence of the weapons of mass-destruction — the lie was later revealed to be on the other side —, whereas the latter version would have required the US president first to wait for an actual attack by Saddam.

Chapter three, entitled “God’s Chosen” (33–49), starts by reviewing relevant sources reporting on, or constructing, the legitimate genealogy and the special charisma of Cyrus the Great. These sources include Herodotus, (Deuter-) Isaiah, and the Cyrus Cylinder, which, in Lincoln’s words, attests to “one of the great imperial fantasies”, namely the “claim that one’s armies are welcomed as liberators” (40). Lincoln then turns to the case of Darius the Great, who, in his inscription at Bisitun, “made a game effort to plead his cause in dynastic terms, but, like most usurpers, he was more inclined to stress the charismatic side of the argument” (43). In a very brief section, Lincoln argues that Darius had claimed that anybody who had seized power “without ritual confirmation of divine favor” (46) was illegitimate. Unfortunately, this claim, plausible as it may appear in theory, is not grounded in available evidence on Achaemenian rituals of investiture. In the following section, Lincoln analyses the five verbs that qualify 93% of the actions of Ahuramazdā in the inscriptions of the kings. Lincoln points to the very restricted radius of actions qualified by these verbs and (somewhat polemically) states that the Achaemenian monarchs “must have

wondered from time to time just why God was so good to them” (48), although that is of course not attested in the sources. The final section assembles several quotations from the Cyrus cylinder, Darius’ inscriptions in Bisitun, an Avestan hymn, and another inscription of Darius, connecting them loosely and suggestively, but without offering any sort of sustained analysis.

Chapter four, on “Creation” (51–65), follows up on the analysis of the verbs used to refer to divine actions and looks at the narrative of creation presented by the inscriptions. Lincoln makes a compelling case for distinguishing two temporal layers: Ahuramazdā’s world-ordering acts situated “in prehistoric eternity” (52) expressed with the verb ²*dā-* versus his making Darius king, Ahuramazdā’s “intervention in history” (52) expressed with the verb *kar-*. Less compelling is Lincoln’s interpretation of the latter action as “something like a divine afterthought” (52), as a divine “response to some unexpected event” (52). Unfortunately this reading is not presented as a hypothesis but as a result of a strict philological analysis; in that way it allows Lincoln to create his own plot. There follows a brief section providing a structuralist reading (again inspired by Clarisse Herrens Schmidt) commenting on Ahuramazdā’s first two creations (earth and sky). Among other interesting things, Lincoln here notes the “unusual, or at least counterintuitive” (53) order, namely of putting earth first. Lincoln finds that unusual with respect to “most of the world’s mythologies” (53), without elucidating the (structuralist? typological? cognitive?) implications of this sort of comparison. Closer to home, in an endnote, Lincoln refers to a verse from the *Gāthās* (Y. 37,1: “Mazdā Ahura... who ordered the lights and the earth and all good things”), that even uses the same word for earth (*būmī-*). However, another verse from the *Gāthās* (Y. 44,4) poses the following question to the Ahura: “Who held the earth down below and the skies (or clouds) from falling?” Although another word for earth (or land) is used here (*zam-*), the verse may show that such orderings are less static than structuralist readings would have it. Lincoln further notes that “Zoroastrian literature has something to say on this question [namely whether there is something below the earth (MSt.)] and offers a hint worth pursuing” (53). Instead of pursuing that hint in an analytical manner, however, we are offered a blank quotation of a passage from a Pahlavi book (Dd. 36,4–8). In the following

sections, Lincoln comments on the other items of Ahuramazdā's original creation as presented in the inscriptions, among them happiness. By referring to the work of other scholars, Lincoln here contrasts the understanding of happiness among "the Achaemenians" and "Zoroastrians" (55), as if these were incompatible classes and as if the latter were some sort of non-historical, fixed entity (and thereby also implicitly excluding that the Achaemenians could have been Zoroastrians). The chapter presents some interesting comparisons between Achaemenian inscriptions on the one hand and Avestan and Middle Persian texts on the other, where "many data show strong similarities" (59). For example, he points to "the temporal structure that distinguishes between three ontologically different eras — primordial eternity, history, and final (or eschatological) eternity — and the cataclysmic transitions from one to the other" (59). Note that this interpretation is the result of a rather synthetic synopsis. The chapter concludes with some interesting observations on the variants of the cosmogonic narrative contained in some later inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes, and the chapter closes with some general remarks on the way cosmogony and eschatology are interlinked in Zoroastrian texts.

The equally brief and dense fifth chapter entitled "Microcosms, Wonders, Paradise" (67–81) starts with a very short but excellent summary of the questions of mortality, sexual differentiation, and diversity in the Pahlavi books. Lincoln then reiterates the report of the upheavals as given by Darius. He concludes: "As in the Zoroastrian myths, this construction of historical conflict pits unity against diversity, truth against the Lie, with the empire defending the interests of God, morality, and progress" (69). As it is presented, this comparison, however, seems problematic in several respects (method, data, historiography, and perspective). Lincoln proceeds to Herodotus' statements on the Persians' expansionist hubris and presents reflections on the emergence of a terminology in the royal inscriptions that predicates the word for earth with imperial connotations, adding theological and cosmological dimensions to the political expansion. Lincoln also comments on a relief sculpture on the royal tombs as "a trope of empire and a microscopic representation of its current political power and geographic empire" (72). (Note that the relief does not show "a fire temple" [72] but a fire altar.) Lincoln then discusses the way the inscriptions present

the palace Darius built at Susa as another model for “microcosmical representations of the empire as world” (73). According to Lincoln all this bears witness to the global, universalistic, and eschatological implications of the political project of the Achaemenians (76). Somewhat conjecturally, Lincoln suggests identifying in the sumptuous banquets of the Persians “their intention... to reverse the fall⁴ by restoring the original unity of matter, perfection of all things, and happiness of mankind” (76). This brings Lincoln to a short presentation of the Persian institution and concept of the *paridaida* (> ‘paradise’), which some texts describe as “an all-embracing totality” and others as spaces of “mere abundance” (79). Lincoln connects this to the description of paradise in a Middle Persian text; pointing to correspondences between Achaemenian texts and the Pahlavi book (once again summarized conveniently in a table), Lincoln argues “that the paradises that the Achaemenians built on earth were meant to offer a foretaste of the delights awaiting the righteous after death and at history’s end” (79) and that “the salvific project that the Wise Lord had entrusted to the Achaemenian kings” (81) required the conquest of Greece (by incorporating some European trees in an Asian empire) in order to be completed. Towards the end of the chapter Lincoln remarks: “We are normally accustomed to view such arguments [claiming to restore primordial wholeness and setting right the afflicted cosmos (MSt.)] as legitimations and rationalizations: the discursive instruments through which guilty actors pretty up the record and soothe their conscience after the dirty work is done. Surely, it can be so. Yet it is also possible that constructions of this sort enter earlier in the game, actively motivating — and not just excusing — at least some of the actors and some of their acts.” (80) (This point has been similarly expressed by Gregor Ahn in his 1992 study of religion in Achaemenian politics.)

Having laid out a consistent, harmonious mosaic of the religious (salvific, eschatological, cosmological, central, elective, dualistic) project underlying the construction of empire, in chapter 6 Lincoln introduces “The Dark Side of Paradise” (83–96). He starts by contrasting the reports on the Achaemenian *paridaida* with a passage in the Avestan *Vendidad* (3,15–21) where the cognate word occurs. Lincoln vaguely

⁴) Note the (questionable) Christian terminology.

(speculatively) suggests that the “Zoroastrian [i.e. Avestan (MSt.)] paradise can be understood as a logical inversion of its Persian counterpart” (85). However, the main thrust of this chapter is an interpretation of a puzzling passage from Plutarch (written in 75 CE) who reports on the bestial treatment given, in 401 BCE, to a soldier by the name of Mithridates who had, under the influence of alcohol during a banquet, asserted that the rebellious brother of the reigning king Artaxerxes II had died by the wounds he had inflicted on him rather than being slain by the king. The relevant section from Plutarch, *The Life of Artaxerxes* (§ 16,2–4) describing the gruesome procedure reads as follows (in Lincoln’s translation):

Taking two troughs that were made to fit closely together, they laid Mithridates on his back inside one of them. Then they fit the other on top so the man’s head, hands, and feet stuck out while it covered the rest of his body. They gave him food, picking his eyes to force him when he resisted. They also poured milk mixed with honey into his mouth, and they poured it over his face. Then they turned his eyes constantly toward the sun, and a multitude of flies settled down, covering his face. Meanwhile, inside, the man did what it is necessary for people to do when they have drunk and eaten. Worms and maggots boiled up from the decay and putrefaction of his excrement, and these ate away his body, boring into his interior. When he was dead and the top was removed, people saw his flesh all eaten away and swarms of such animals surrounding his vitals, eating them and leeching at them. Thus, Mithridates was gradually destroyed over seventeen days, until he finally died. (87)

Lincoln presents a fascinating analysis of this report. For linguistic reasons Lincoln regards the treatment as “interrogatory” rather than punitive (88). While linguistically not implausible, this interpretation appears as somewhat cynical in view of the inevitable, cruel, and miserable death the soldier was subjected to.⁵ Besides, Plutarch makes it clear that Mithridates had died before the results of the ‘interrogation’ would have become visible (since the troughs revealing the state of his interiors were only opened when he was already dead). Lincoln then points to the necessity of the procedure in light of Achaemenian royal ideology. He also refers to the special position of the Lie in the Persian universe

⁵ For this cruel procedure including its medical aspects see now also Jacobs 2009. According to him, death ultimately results from blood poisoning (Jacobs 2009:126).

and draws a (rather conjectural) comparison between the suffering of Mithridates and of the sinners in hell according to a much later Pahlavi text (89–90). The next section presents a structural interpretation of the very procedure pointing to several aspects “with deep significance” (90), pointing to elements of ethics, cosmology, demonology, and eschatology. Lincoln’s captivating analysis is based on Zoroastrian views of milk and honey as well as of the process of digestion as attested in the much later Pahlavi books. I remain unconvinced of the interrogatory and legal nature of the procedure; I think that Lincoln himself provides powerful counterarguments for regarding this prolonged execution as a public display of the consequences of misbehavior (by lying) and undermining accepted social hierarchies and court etiquette with a known outcome. In the following section, Lincoln links this treatment to the “olfactory code” that “came to dominate the Persian imaginary of evil” (94), also mirrored by that king’s unique preference, in his inscriptions, for the word *gastā* (foul, stinking) when referring to what he asks the gods to protect him from (usually translated as ‘evil’). The final section of this chapter (94–96) presents a summary of the argument of the book.

The extended essay in which he reconstructs Achaemenian politics as a homogenous religious project is followed by the postscript on Abu Ghraib, which illustrates, if nothing else, that the structural reading Lincoln so successfully applies to the data from the Achaemenian Empire also lends itself to an analysis of US imperial politics. Among other things, Lincoln here claims “that the minidramas staged at Abu Ghraib were not designed to degrade the Iraqi prisoners. Rather, like the treatment of Mithridates by Artaxerxes’ soldiers, they were designed to confirm the captors’ worst suspicions concerning the Iraqis... The point was to establish that such people got what they deserved...” (103) Lincoln does not seem to realize that he is here contradicting his own interpretation of the Mithridates episode (which, he argues, was interrogatory rather than confirmatory). Moreover, the comparison with Mithridates does not hold because that procedure was a public performance, while Abu Ghraib was probably never intended to attract the worldwide attention it eventually received. Unfortunately, and somewhat surprisingly, the reader looks in vain for any reflections on the comparative project underlying the conjunction of text and postscript.

A general thesis Lincoln defends in this book is that religion (Zoroastrianism) in a first phase helps to establish empire (in that case Achaemenian Persia), by presenting a suitable framework to stage its “most aggressive tendencies and its most audacious ambitions as righteous, sacred, and holy” (95). In a second phase, then, “when the empire finds it increasingly difficult to contain the contradiction between its discourse and its practice” (95) and therefore “faces the possibility of moral exhaustion” (96), the leaders and foot soldiers alike face the need to “repersuade themselves”, possibly by staging “circular spectacles in which actions that would be considered brutish under any other circumstances produce results that (seem to) confirm the lofty principles that rendered them licit in the first place.” (96) Even if that claim is interesting as such and would call for comparative studies, it is difficult to see how the single example from Plutarch should be enough to validate it, even for the case of Achaemenian Persia. Source critical reflections (dismissed by Lincoln in favor of his structural method) make the problems even worse. Moreover, Lincoln fails to properly acknowledge other forms of public execution spectacles such as mutilations and impalements that are already attested in the ‘first phase’ of ‘paradisiacal’ empire construction and that are even mentioned by Darius in his propaganda inscription [DB §§32.33.43.50].⁶ Last but not least, the general validity of the scenario outlined by Lincoln for an analysis of US American history on a large scale (or even on the micro-scale of the era Bush) remains purely hypothetical.

In general, Lincoln holds that “[c]ontradictions between sacred discourse and bestial practice, as well as the dialectical relation between moral confidence and moral depravity, are built into the deep structure of empire, and, the longer imperial rule persists, the more episodes will accumulate in which these tensions manifest themselves painfully.” (96) Seen in this light, Mithridates’ treatment as described by Plutarch (and the scenes witnessed and reported from Abu Ghraib) are presented as results of historical necessity. While suggestive, statements such as these ultimately remain vague (and therefore they may appear as suggestive rhetoric) with regard to their epistemological status. Is this an

⁶ See Jacobs (2009) for the different forms of execution practiced by the Achaemenians and the contrast to the apparently peaceful modes of presentation in the visual arts.

embryonic theory of empire? Are we being presented with the political reflections of a critical observer or are we dealing with a structuralist theory (note the extensive use of binary oppositions resulting in a historical process)? In order to take the step from an interesting and finely laid out case study to the level of less impressionistic generalizations, in other words: towards theory, it would among other things be necessary for the religionist to engage with discourses and discussions in other relevant fields and disciplines dealing with ‘empire’ (and empires), violence, and torture. Such an approach could no longer avoid discussing the very concept of ‘empire’ (used more like a catchword than an operational-analytical-theoretical category by Lincoln) and would raise the question to what extent that term can throw light on such diverse political structures as the Achaemenian rule and the United States⁷ and its military presence in the Middle East (once upon a time ruled by Achaemenian kings). Lastly, dealing with torture as a universal and timeless instrument of power in empires may obstruct the view on the specific dynamics of the reappearance of torture as a sanctioned practice in the context of recent changes of the global order.⁸

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⁷) For the United States, Sardar/Wynn Davies 2002:65 voice the opinion that “it makes little sense to talk of Empire and American imperialism; indeed, such rhetoric and analysis are dangerously obsolete.”

⁸) For these developments see Gardell 2008a; 2008b.

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